

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF ADOLESCENT SUBJECTIVITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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### **The production of subjectivity in the digital age**

The history of a subject cannot be thought out of his environment, first, of the family group that receives him and waits him. This history is threaded to the socio cultural group that will be the framework for the deployment of subjectivity. The identificatory statements of the family environment will be the sediment were a complex structure will be weaving, buoyed by the various significant events and their impact on the psyche. Adolescence is a milestone in the transformation of the subject; it is a moment of deconstruction of that offered by the family. The processes of the pubertal-adolescent-youth involve specific works in relation to the subjective transformations. These operations are deployed intertwined in the encounter with peers that, in a healthy growth, will involve a new "we".

The dizzying socio cultural changes of recent times, especially promoted by leading technologies, have made a heavy impact on current subjectivity. The information and communications technologies (ICT) are not only "tools" but they stand as an authentic cultural mediation, both in the constitution of subjectivity and its constant transformation throughout life. Computers, Internet, telecommunications and media (television sets, computers, mobile telephony devices, video game consoles, etc.) have

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revolutionized the field of knowledge and the exchange between individuals. It must be considered that, without a doubt, these innovations have influences in the framework of inter-subjective relationships, both intra and inter-generational.

Traditional systems of subjective constitution (family, school, social values and standards, among others) have multiplied and diversified. This has opened up new possibilities, but has also weakened their role in training, decaying as identificatory models for new generations. Facing the subjectivity emptiness, that appears as a correlate of this weakening, the ICT start operating as value producers' agents, ideals and models of action, outlining a new subject: the digital native.

Today, the globalized world moves by the constant action of individuals who spread continuous, fast and heterogeneous information that is reflected in virtual realities. These movements blur geographical barriers, but also the boundaries between the private and intimate, and the public.

Especially in younger generations, these technologies mediate links and unpublished forms of encounter (or dis-encounter) with the other, the languages and the communication codes, and also they affect the way of living and understanding reality.

### **New bond configurations and virtuality**

Children, adolescents and young people relate to each other through communication processes that create a network modeled with the contribution of collective subjectivities: the "virtual brotherhood", a fraternity in cyberspace that is transmitted through digital texts, shared images and sounds.

It should also be noted that the continuous use of new technologies is changing cognitive functions. Memory (with multiple databases and hypertexts), imagination (using simulation), perception (with virtual realities), the concept of time and space (through parallel processing, the absence of temporo-spatial barriers) are being constituted in unknown new forms that open new questions regarding their scope and limitations.

The school becomes a contentious field regarding the transmission of knowledge. Among the digital natives, with their cognitive functions molded into the computer age,

and teachers with a different constitution and cognitive functioning, it is created, sometimes a very difficult gap to cross. At times the traditional school appears as obsolete before the impotence of both teachers and students and their parents. Children and adolescents monopolize information exerting power over adults, sometimes digital illiterates, which permanently require their assistance to operate in today's world. Managing an ATM, turning on and manipulating an electronic device or using a computer program can become a battlefield. A new landscape emerges in intergenerational relationships, which makes up other realities which are a source of new research and approaches.

In the inter-subjective level, so as the boundaries between public and private spheres have become diluted, intergenerational ties, particularly parent-child have also been substantially transformed.

To focus on a particular case becomes interesting so as to see how this new link configuration in the virtual space works.

*N., 49 years old, consults because, since his marital separation (happened a few months earlier), he cannot mend the bond with his children, especially with his daughter E., 19 years old. With M., his 12 years old boy, the relationship is more fluid; he usually goes with him to football matches and he also regularly lunch with him in the house where he lives since the separation. Throughout the interviews, N. tells us that the relationship with the ex-wife is almost zero, that they do not talk and when they do, it is for accuse each other for the failure of the couple. The discussions always happen before the children, and they call them so as to function as referees of the fight of their parents. N. supports this attitude saying: "They are family affairs and they concern to them as well. We discuss all within the family. We always went everywhere together, there were no secrets at home... Similarly, I have always forbidden the children to close the doors of their rooms as they should have nothing to hide. "This practice, agreed with the mother of his children, prevented, among other things, that the friends accepted to stay overnight in the house because they were uncomfortable in this situation of lack of privacy.*

*N. continues telling: "I have an independent work, I handle my schedule, so that nothing has to change with the separation, my ex-wife has the key to my house, I have the key to the house where she lives with my children, everything is transparent."*

*The trigger for marital separation was an N's episode of infidelity. The daughter reproaches his father having cheated on his wife. E. had discovered the romance that*

*the father had with another woman when he put the pictures with her lover on a social network (Facebook) where her daughter was listed as "friend".*

*Some time later, E. gets pregnant by her boyfriend, with whom she was having a relationship since a few months ago. She announces her pregnancy on the same network, and thus his father learns he is going to be a grandfather.*

The spaces of the home and the network appear to show, coincidentally, the distortion that is at stake between public and private in this family configuration and that it also generates a dynamic persecutor/persecuted, in which parents and children spy and monitor each other (Rassial, 1999). The non-differentiation between public and private is made evident (among other things) on the public exhibition of sexuality, both of adults and of young people. Such distortion would seem to be a result of the existing confusion between the generations and of the impossibility of recognition and respect for privacy of each of the members of this family. In this case it can be considered that virtuality expresses what it was already distorted. Between parents and children, boundaries between the territory of the explicit and visible and the intimate sphere are deleted. Adults and teens share the same social networks; the parent-child bond has changed into fraternal and the intergenerational barriers have been blurred. They are shown as "friends" and as equals avoiding the psychic operation of confrontation. This operation will deploy both in the physical presence and in the emotional and genuine dialogue. One might think that the oedipal rivalry becomes a fraternal struggle in the field of virtuality, altering the processes of subjectivation and the links of underpinning that every teenager needs to grow.

### **Some approaches on subjectivity in the digital age**

Many researches on this subject have put the emphasis on certain characteristics of the digital age that hamper the subjective constitution and hinder the healthy psychological processes, the inter-relationships and the social bonds. Both Emiliano Galende (2004) as Zygmunt Bauman (2005) emphasize the little emotional commitment that characterizes the current links: the concepts of "*robotized subject*" and "*liquid*

*modernity*" aim to that. The current context, marked by the immediacy and by shifting scenarios, contrasts with the system of the solid which is characteristic of modernity.

The psychoanalyst Marcelo Viñar (2010) warns us that before prematurely applauding or condemning the epochal changes and their impact on the subjective constitution of teenagers of today, we must reflect how adolescence is built according to these changes. If teens are not a natural entity but a social construction typical of each time and each place, of each historical, cultural and economic situation, the border between the mandates of his culture and the singularity of the subject must be studied. Without the marks of the time, young people are at risk of becoming an obsolete object, representative of the previous generation.

### **Exploration work and transitionally**

The psychic work of the lapse between puberty and adolescence (Grassi, 2010) - among others, the detachment from the parental figures, the exogamy and hetero-familial way out, the finding-object creation and the constitution of an own identificatory project- require time and a space to metabolize the changes, explore and experience new worlds and encounters with the others outside the known and familiar.

Mario Wasserman (2011) believes that, from the pubertal trauma, the subject is "sentenced to explore." This exploratory demand comes not only from his new genitalized body, which will have to be appropriated, but also from the social environment that forces him to seek shelter outside the home and an exogamic love object.

While it is personal, this exploration work is done by the teenager in company, underpinned by different objects that hold him in his quest: the peer group as a model par excellence, but also the named by Winnicott as transitional phenomena and objects (Winnicott, 1986).

The transitionality expresses an intermediate zone of experience between reality and fantasy, between intimacy and relationship with the outside world, a zone that allows easing tensions between the internal and the external, which is in direct continuity with the child's play and this in turn with the potential space between mother and baby.

The art, the cultural experience, the creator game are examples of this intermediate zone in the life of a healthy individual (Winnicott, 1986).

This space plays an important role not only in moments of subjective constitution but throughout life.

In the lapse between puberty adolescence, objects and transitional phenomena acquire a fundamental importance, because they allow the adolescent subject to move through the space and the time required, in order to leave the family environment and to perform exploratory work to achieve it.

As Wasserman posed, "the diary, the traveling guitar, and the sneakers that he never fails to use ..." are the supporting objects that accompany the teenager in his explorations (2011).

### **The new communication technologies: the use of the virtual space as exploratory and transitional modality**

Subjectivity is structured from the relationships with the others, tangled up in the links. We have seen how, in adolescent times, the peer group plays an essential supporting function in the exploratory roads leading to the hetero-familial world.

While the indiscriminate use of communication technologies and new interaction forms can become an artificial instrument for manipulating reality favoring omnipotence experiences and hampering the ability to bond affectively, one might think in these tools as enablers of new scenarios and spaces of exploration and testing for a subsequent search of amicable or romantic relationships in a space outside the family.

Currently, the use of Internet, social networks, blogs and the messages and images transmitted through mobile devices can help adolescents to expand their personal relationship network with peers in a surprising way.

The virtual space that is established from these new technologies could be considered as a real transitional space that is, in most cases, another opportunity to explore the world outside the family in the puberty adolescence lapse.

In the virtual world of "as if", like when a child plays, the adolescent can test and simulate different behaviors, approaching the opposite sex without risking rejection and ridicule, playing with different identities with the illusion of "creating" his objects and accessing to different realities from his own without too many risks for his vulnerable narcissism.

**Here is another example transcribed by way of illustration:**

*The parents of Daniela, 16 years old, consult because they are very worried about her. Daniela is a highly inhibited obese teenager, who is in his fourth year of high school at a religious school; she has no difficulties in school performance, her grades are excellent, but she cannot interact with peers. She doesn't go out, she doesn't talk on the phone with anyone: "At first, she was invited to parties or to the movies; she always refused, she just wants to go out with us, and she is no more invited (...). Now, they call her only to ask for a folder, because she always has everything up to date, she lends them the folder and nothing else."*

*During interviews with parents, some striking data are emerging: the difficulties they had in their adolescence to interact with peers, the bewilderment that produces them their daughters' growth (they have another, two years younger, which is her sister's opposite, what scares the parents and arouses the criticism of her older sister). In their speech, they give a glimpse that they are really just concerned about Daniela's obesity, because they believe that "the street" is very dangerous for young women going out... "If she would want going out to eat a hamburger with her classmates" the father says in an interview, "I would have no problem to take her and then to pick her up" (...) "In fact we don't want Daniela to be like other girls that since adolescence have sex; today all is too easy and very dangerous. "*

*Daniela is a very shy girl, her hair covers her face and her voice is almost inaudible, she criticizes (using almost the same words that their parents) their classmates, she condemns the talks listened in the classroom: "They only talk about kids, they are all crazy" and, to the therapist's surprise, she makes a detailed account of the outings to which she doesn't attend (and therefore she should not know with so much details). Daniela uses a social network to browse with her classmates the meeting points of the peer group, but she does so from the solitude? of her room. At the moment, she cannot do anything but "see" what other girls and other boys, of her age,*

*experience. She writes down everything what her peers are doing or telling; then she transforms it into stories that she tells in session and, as time goes by, and with the analytical work will be of use for Japanese anime illustrations that the young woman makes (who happens to be an excellent cartoonist).*

*Daniela slowly begins to use social networks to communicate and not just to spy and, eventually, she joins a group of young anime artists; at first, contact is virtual ?, later they begin to meet to exchange drawings and stories, stories of heroes and heroines that live passions and dangers facing an unknown world that scares but it is fascinating ...*

In this example, unlike the above, we see how Daniela achieves, from the virtual space, the approach to a peer group that was severely hampered by the parental structure. She comes into contact with them from a community of interests (the anime), in a space that at the beginning is not external but allows her to go exploring and testing till achieving the confidence to attend the meeting "face to face" and "hand to hand" with peers in the outside. Thus, through these contacts, she achieves to go through the "parental lattice".

Regarding this matter, Ungar says that, considering the importance of the peer group, it can be seen that new groupings have emerged where there are new forms of partnership among people, and also novel forms of group identity. The most current seem to be, according to Ungar, the subcultures formed by groups of individuals who share affinities and meet to exchange information on graffiti, role playing, types of music, etc. Ungar notes that the mass media play a central role, as they build ego ideals through the "imposition" of a product that must be purchased. This imposition of the media would cross the protective barrier that once could offer the family, the school, the religion or the State. The author expresses: "Since the advent of mass media, the space in which links are developed has changed. Before, this sphere was the family, the school, the club. Now, virtual spaces have been superimposed. The mode in which a teenager today goes through the media world is through the so-called virtual reality. The group exchange can be in the 'cyberspace', through e-mail, chat, net games, and photos. There the young man can be whoever he wants to be and, besides, he can keep himself out of sight" (Ungar, 2006, p. 90). The marking of these new spaces that traverses the teenage would lead to wonder about the effects that they can have in shaping subjectivity, while Ungar asserts that no personal encounter becomes necessary, if both the cellular and the computer are mediators (2006).



Adults often complain about the impoverishment of language through the use of abbreviations and specific codes of digital communication. However, teenagers also create new communication expressions and they invent new words that allow them to differentiate themselves from adult codes and to establish their autonomy facing their parents.

"The Internet is one of the interaction environments, social simulation and construction of subjectivity that are emerging more powerful, which makes the network a necessary field of social research" (Henaio, 2006).

Ungar presents a question about how the psychoanalytic clinical work, an intimate and private space, is located before this current environment. In this connection, the author believes that psychoanalysts should avoid a normative position condemning models of the time and, in any event, to be opened to reflection of what happens. She states that "the issue of the links on line can be an alternative as a test space" (Ungar, 2006, p. 91). This issue should be resumed considering the uniqueness of each case, and therefore, which of these "on line links" can become an alternative, and how others might be functioning as screen, before the impossibility of relate with another person.

We must see, then, in each case in particular, whether the cultural changes, especially in the field of communications, result, predominantly, in a healthy achievement or in a hindrance for pubertal adolescent psychic works.

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